

A LIFETIME OF LEARN BY DOING



GRC ALUMNUS ROBERT C. TAPELLA TALKS ABOUT HIS ROAD TO THE GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE

BY STACIA MOMBURG

IN 2007, PRIOR TO HIS CONFIRMATION HEARING to become the next U.S. Public Printer, **Robert C. Tapella (B.S., GrC, 1991)** sat with the committee that would refer his nomination to senior Senator Diane Feinstein, discussing an issue that might cloud his appointment.

It was Title 44 Section 301 of the United States Code: “The President of the United States shall nominate and, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, appoint a suitable person, who must be a practical printer and versed in the art of bookbinding, to take charge of and manage the Government Printing Office. His title shall be Public Printer.”

“The problem was that I had no experience in bookbinding,” Tapella said. “But I told the committee I didn’t believe Senator Feinstein would allow any member of her committee to challenge a nominee with a degree from Cal Poly in Graphic Communication Printing Management.

“I credit my Cal Poly degree in helping me actually make the bookbinding statute moot and helping to get me the job.”

He also credits Cal Poly with stoking his desire for hands-on learning. Tapella was familiar with the concept of learning by doing clear back to his childhood.

“From the time I was 12, I was learning by doing, and I was extremely successful as a result,” he said. “Cal Poly was a natural

fit for me, and the reputation of the Graphic Communication Department made my decision to attend that much easier.”

Tapella found his way to Cal Poly via a junior high calligraphy class and an innate sense of entrepreneurship. “I was required to take calligraphy twice a week, and I realized I was good at it,” he said.

At 13, the Sunnyvale native parlayed his talent into a job at New Scribes, a San Jose menu design shop. From there, he began to build his business. “When New Scribes closed, I took some of

their customer base and opened Tapellagraphics,” he said.

By the time he got to Cal Poly, Tapella had tried his hand at direct mail and print brokerage, as well as broadcast ad purchasing. It was during Cal Poly’s Week of Welcome that Tapella entered the political fray.

“One of my WOW counselors was a College Republican member,” he said. Joining the club himself, Tapella saw an opportunity to shift his business from menus to political collateral.

In 1985, still running a successful print business, he became a full-time field representative in Congressman Bill Thomas’ Pismo Beach office, where he worked until 1993.

In 1996, Thomas asked Tapella to move to Washington, D.C., to work on the Committee for House Oversight. And in 1998 the Clerk of the House invited him to help develop and rework the infrastructure behind the legislative process.

“I was involved in retooling the electronic voting system,

developing plans for a House document management system, and restructuring the legislative information management system,” Tapella said. “We moved the paper world into the electronic age.”

In 2002, the nominee for public printer, Bruce Janus, asked Tapella to be part of a team that would bring the outdated Government Printing Office into the 21st century.

“I used everything I ever learned up to that point – from printing, design and running my own businesses to under-

standing the legislative process and navigating the political arena,” Tapella said.

In 2007, Janus retired – and asked Tapella to continue what their team had begun, digitizing and streamlining the processes for printing federal documents. Tapella threw his hat in the ring to become the next public printer.

Three years later, as he prepares to retire, Tapella said he’s grateful his alma mater provided him with a solid foundation for his career.

“Cal Poly taught me how to work well with others and how to be involved – qualities that helped me tackle real-world challenges throughout my career.”

For additional photos and links to more information on Public Printer and Cal Poly alum Robert C. Tapella, check out the online edition of Cal Poly Magazine at www.magazine.calpoly.edu. □



(Left) Public Printer Bob Tapella and Deputy Public Printer Paul Erickson inspect the printing of President Barack Obama’s official photo. (Right) Bob Tapella presents Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi with the first *Congressional Record* printed on 100 percent recycled paper at the Speaker’s Office. All photos courtesy Government Printing Office.